

Fire in the night

Story by P&G Chris Haley
Photos Courtesy of Carter Sweetbrier

“I was concerned about the wounds. It was a shock, this was something I had never seen before. First aid became a priority. After a couple days had passed, I felt bad for not being able to find the missing people. I began to second guess myself ... was there anything better I could have done, or maybe something faster.”

... Seaman Apprentice Jared Bussard, Station Honolulu



The smell of the sea mixed with the vapors of diesel fuel and filled their nostrils as their boat cut through the darkness, pounding across the 5-foot waves toward the fire that pierced the seamless black canvas like an errant brush out of control. Nearing the fire, about a mile from Honolulu International Airport, they could see that the deck of the boat was completely engulfed. If survivors were to be found, they would not be on the boat.

Eyes and spotlights turned to the water as the fire raged. BN3 Jason Hagen, coxswain, didn't want to get too close, worried about fuel tanks still left unburned. He brought his boat closer to the fishing vessel Kathleen, giving his crew the vantage point needed to find survivors.

As Hagen closed in, the intense heat radiating from the fire could be felt inside the cabin of the 41-foot utility boat. “I was on the windward side of the fire and the heat still made it in,” he said.

Seaman Apprentice Jared Bussard spotted arms stretching from the middle of a dozen fishing floats near the burning long-liner. Their heads barely visible, Arthur Mutfly and Tae Hwan Kim were struggling to stay afloat. Struggling to stay alive.

The crew quickly threw lines into the floats. Several landed across Tae.

“We had lines draped over the top of him, but he wouldn't grab on. I think he was scared to let go,” said Hagen. “I couldn't see the other guy.”

While Tae hung on, Mutfly, the ship's captain, 49, of Kaneohe, prepared to let go. As the Coast Guard boat got within about 10 yards, he lunged forward and started to swim toward the rescue boat. Bussard, Seaman Apprentice Angela Luna and MK3 Burns Mollette met him in the stern of the utility boat, but couldn't get him on board. Mutfly was cut on the forehead and temple and bleeding badly. As the crew tried to help him into the boat their hands became drenched in blood.

A make-shift step was made out of a piece of line looped down into the water and Mutfly was able to gain purchase and was helped into the boat. Additional injuries were very obvious as the crew laid a naked Mutfly down in the welldeck of the 41-footer.

“He was talking and his eyes were open, but he had dark splotchy burns on his face and chest and he was real pale,” said Hagen. “The crew said Mutfly was very cold and the burns and blood made it hard to pull him out of the water.”

Once Mutfly was on board, the crew turned their attention back to Tae, 59, a Korean national, who was the ship's fishing captain. The crew tried to get him to let go of the floats without success. Hagen radioed a rescue helicopter circling above and asked them to drop their rescue swimmer. ASN3 Evangelos A. Liassas, who was lowered into the water said, “I swam to the boat and drifted back toward him.” The rescue swimmer couldn't get Tae to let go of the floats. “I had to wrestle him out,” he said.

Liassas could feel the intense heat from the fire. “The boat was blazing. I had to push off the boat just to get clear. The whole thing went pretty fast,” he said. The rescue took less than five minutes but seemed like much longer to Liassas. Once both were back in the helo, Liassas noticed that his hair and body were covered with fuel.

With ocean temperatures averaging 78 degrees in February off Oahu, Hawaii, hypothermia was a concern. Blankets were brought and the crew of the 41-footer provided basic first aid, applying bandages to Mutfly's head and hands.

On the trip to shore, both survivors were asked if there were any other people on the boat, both answered “no.”

Above: The crew of a Station Honolulu 41-footer checks the remains of the Kathleen. Far left: The burnt-out hull of the Kathleen

“The whole night was scary, seeing the victim caused a sense of urgency to get him on board. When we were trying to get him on board I felt helpless because it was taking so long. Once the victim was on board and initial first aid was complete, I really thought he would survive.”

... Seaman Apprentice Angie Luna, Station Honolulu



The 41-footer headed back to Station Honolulu at Sand Island and the HH-65 helicopter from Air Station Barbers Point flew to Honolulu International Airport, where ambulances were waiting. On the trip in, both Muffy and Tae said there were three others on board the boat. The search was on again.

The three other men on board were Faisamoa, Jr., 39, of Wahiak, who joined the crew Feb. 11, the day the ship departed, just 10 days before the fire; Benson Yens, 33, who lived in late Hawaii, but was from

Micronesia; and William Myers, 41, who was from Hanalei, Hawaii.

Muffy was put into a stokes litter and transferred to an ambulance at Sand

Island and taken to Stranb Medical Center. Tae was taken by ambulance to Kuakini Medical Center.


The 41-footer returned to fight the fire, while the helicopter began searching. The Coast Guard Cutter Assateague searched the area and the State Marine Patrol searched the shoreline. According to Hagen, Navy Tug 806, from Pearl Harbor greatly assisted with the fire fighting efforts. “We knocked it down, but they permanently extinguished the fire,” he said.

The Coast Guard Cutter Sweetbrier from Alaska, in town for training, was sent to help. It arrived only to see Kathleen sink. The fire had burned for nearly six hours devouring the \$350,000 56-foot fiberglass ship. The 17-year-old vessel sank in about 600 feet of water off Ewa Beach.

Tae was treated and released. Muffy arrived at the hospital with second and third degree burns covering 90 percent of his body. He died the following day.

According to Lt. j.g. Rich Terburner, the investigating officer, Tae stated that he was on watch when a fireball engulfed the galley.

Everyone else was asleep inside a berthing area under the pilothouse. Tae said that he screamed and scrambled on the deck trying to wake those underneath.

According to Tae’s statement, Muffy appeared, bursting through the flames. Tae moved Muffy out of the way and doused the flames on his clothes. Nothing was seen or heard from the rest of the crew. Tae helped Muffy onto the collection of fishing floats and waited for help to arrive out of the darkness. 



Left: Station Honolulu 41-footer speeds towards the Kathleen. Above: The stern of the Kathleen moments before it sank in 600-foot of water.

A whale's tale

By Lt. Matt Murtha
CGC Kiska

The Coast Guard National Marine Fisheries Service and the Hawaii State Marine Patrol joined forces in early February to rescue a 35- to 40-foot Humpback whale that was entangled six miles northwest of Waipio Valley.

After receiving reports of the founder- ing whale Feb. 6, Gene Nitta of the National Marine Fisheries Service departed for Hilo to coordinate the rescue. With the Coast Guard Cutter Kiska unavailable because of engine maintenance, a 22-foot vessel was provided by the SMP. Nitta and Kiska crewman Steve Lowmy joined Marine Patrol Deputy Andy Ford for the 60 mile ocean transit to the position reported by tourist helicopters.

After 30 minutes in the area, the exhausted whale was spotted 250 yards off shore periodically bobbing to the surface for air. Upon close inspection, a 3/4 inch diameter synthetic line was seen wrapped tightly around the tail. The line then ran forward along each side of the whale and was wrapped around each pectoral fin. The entanglement had effectively hog-tied the whale, making normal swimming impossible. The other end of the line trailed down and was apparently caught on the bottom further limiting the whale’s swimming ability.



For the next two hours the 3 officers worked to free the exhausted whale, all the while keeping an eye on two 8- to 10-foot tiger sharks that were circling the area. Eventually, Ford maneuvered the vessel close enough for Nitta and Lowmy to reach the whale and the tangled lines with a 12-foot boat hook. The lines were then cut with a knife attached to the boat hook and the whale slowly swam away.

Nitta commented they were fortunate to reach the whale in time and although the whale was obviously stressed and exhausted by the incident, he expects the whale to fully recover. Nitta also praised the helicopter pilots for initially notifying the Coast Guard and asks that any incidents of marine mammals in distress be reported to NMFS or the Coast Guard so that the Hawaiian Marine Mammal Stranding Network can be alerted and appropriate action taken. 